

Empowering girls through English Language Learning

Neither of Brahim Thiam's parents can read or write. If they could, Thiam would email his mother every morning from the United States, where he has spent the summer studying as a Mandela Washington Fellow.

"Despite the fact that my mom isn't educated, she has always pushed me to get an education," Thiam said at the 2017 Mandela Washington Fellows Summit in Washington, D.C. "When she gets a letter, she has to ask someone else to read the letter for her."



Thiam, who lives in Mauritania, now teaches English to teenagers and young adults, both men and women. He has noticed that the girls in his classes tend to outperform the boys. "But when it comes to going on to secondary education, the boys go but the girls are left behind," he said.

Thiam tells his female students: "This is not the world of men. It is the world of whoever is educated. If you are not educated, you are left behind."

Changing cultural ideas about gender roles is hard work, but Thiam found a support system when he discovered the YALI Network through the [U.S. Embassy in Nouakchott](#). He became involved with the #Africa4Her campaign by completing the YALI Network Online Course [Understanding the Rights of Women and Girls](#) and later hosting a #YALILearns event on the same subject.

The network took some getting used to. "In the beginning, I was just observing what people would do," Thiam said. "I saw people from Africa doing good things and posting it. And I said, 'Those people are just like me. So why can't I do the same thing?'"

He decided to apply for the Mandela Washington Fellowship. He was rejected on his first try, but then he reached out to a former Fellow from Burkina Faso to ask for advice. That Fellow worked with Thiam for months, giving him advice and motivation. The second year that Thiam applied, he won the fellowship.

"For me, I see the [YALI Network](#) as a way to be connected to the world," Thiam said. "Suppose I create a project in Mauritania and we have no network. It stops there. But with the YALI Network, we network with others. I can do projects and send them to the site. If the project is published, people from across Africa will see it, and from there I can get reactions and connections. It's all about networking, getting connected to other people."

Thiam plans to use the YALI Network and the skills and connections he has gained as a Mandela Washington Fellow to continue promoting girls' and women's education in Mauritania. He likes to repeat a saying: "If a boy is educated in a society, it's just one person who is educated. But if a woman is educated, the whole society is educated."
